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ON PAGE 18

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In Sight: Killer Lasers

Lethal warships in space. Laser beams fired from orbiting rockets. Satellites zapped out of the sky. It sounds like the script of *Star Wars*, but according to testimony last week, the Pentagon's top weapons man believes it is perilously close to becoming a reality. Richard DeLauer, chief of research and engineering for the Defense Department, predicts that the Soviet Union may be ready to put into orbit as early as next year laser weapons capable of destroying U.S. spy and communications satellites. By 1990, he expects the Soviets to have "a large, permanent, manned, orbital space complex capable of effectively attacking ground, sea and air targets from space." DeLauer's views were inadvertently leaked when Republican Congressman Ken Kramer of Colorado, thinking a hearing before the House Armed Services Committee was still closed to the public, read a top-secret briefing paper aloud.

The ominous projections, which

are disputed by some defense scientists, go considerably beyond previous U.S. assessments of the Soviet lead in the space arms race. The two nations agreed in 1967 to ban weapons of mass destruction from space, but efforts to extend the pact to cover antisatellite weapons, including space-based lasers, have been fruitless. The Pentagon says that since 1977 the Soviets have had an operational nonlaser anti-satellite satellite that explodes near the target, spraying it

with metal-piercing fragments. The U.S. hopes to test its own satellite-killer system this summer: rockets launched from F-15 fighter jets. Meanwhile, the Administration's 1983 budget proposes that \$218.3 million be spent on space defense, with another \$115.7 million for laser research and \$40.6 million for a space-laser program. Though the basis for DeLauer's predictions has not been made public, it is thought to be an analysis of photographs of a weapons system at the Soviet testing center in Ramenskoye, near Moscow. The pictures were taken by the presumed laser system's likely target: U.S. spy satellites.



Drawing of laser weapon zapping target